ENGLISH METRICAL PARAPHRASES OF THE BIBLE, 1549-1696

BY

VIRGINIA MAUD LOWELL

A.B., Wheaton College, 1941
A.M., University of Illinois, 1942

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is an extreme honor as well as a pleasure to have had the guidance and assistance of Professor Harris Francis Fletcher in the pursuance of this study. The work was undertaken at his suggestion, and his encouragement has retrieved my morale in many instances.

Others who have lent freely of their time and effort in my behalf and to whom I am indebted are the following members of the staff of the University of Illinois Library: Miss Isabelle F. Grant, Rare Book Room Librarian; Miss Helen M. McIntyre, Consultant in Bibliography; Miss Eleanor F. Matthews, Cataloger; Miss Fanny Dunlap, Reference Librarian; and Miss Eva Faye Benton, English Librarian. In addition, members of the staffs of the Newberry Library, Chicago, and the Harper Library at the University of Chicago have ably assisted me.

My thanks are due also to my parents for their encouragements and prayers, without which this work might never have been completed.

R. UNIV.
BIBLIOTHEEK
LEIDEN

ENGLISH METRICAL PARAPHRASES OF THE BIBLE, 1549-1696

In the sixteenth century two forces converged to make the rendering of the Bible into English verse much more popular than it had been previously. The Renaissance interest in translating the classics into the vernacular included the Bible, and the Renaissance love of song and of verse-making encouraged making the translations metrical.

The Reformation also encouraged this type of writing. As early as 1229 the Synod at Tholouse had forbidden laymen to read any part of the Bible except the Psalter, breviary or book of hours; even these were not to be in the vulgar tongue. The 1508 Council of Oxford and Henry VIII's 1530 proclamation restated this prohibition of the vernacular Bible from the laity. The Reformation, however, insisted on the Bible in the language of the people because it placed the source of authority in the Bible rather than the church.

Although the Roman service, based on the Hebrew ritual, had early used congregational participation in responses and music, it is probable that in England none but those literate in Latin ever participated in the responses; and long before 1550 the music of the church had become too difficult to be sung by the congregation. In addition, the prick song rendered by the choir had become so elaborated that it was impossible for even those few worshipers who knew Latin to understand the words. The Reformers urged that the service be understood by the people and encouraged congregational participation. Both Luther and Calvin provided vernacular Psalms and the Ten Commandments and other accessories to the service in meter. Luther is thought to have written both words and music himself. Calvin wrote a few metrical Psalms and took others from the Psalms of Marot and Beza, the former of whom wrote the Psalms which were welcomed in French court circles and sung by

Roman and Reformer alike; later they were declared heretical and Marot fled to Geneva where, with Beza's assistance, he completed the Psalter. Calvin employed Guillaume Franc to set it to unisonous music and published both words and music in 1553 annexed to his catechism.

In England too, before the middle of the sixteenth century, the metrical Psalm had made its appearance. In 1548 or 1549 nineteen rhymed English Psalms were printed in London by Edward Whitchurch; they were from the pen of Thomas Sternhold. In 1549 John Hopkins combined thirty-seven of Sternhold's and seven of his own metrical Psalms to make a book which immediately became popular as a hymnal. Some of these Psalms the exiles, fleeing from the persecution of Mary, carried to the Continent. There, worshiping with the French Protestants at Frankfort, Geneva, and elsewhere, they found singing Psalms an important part of the public service. To provide English words for the English worshipers, William Whittingham combined the forty-four Sternhold-Hopkins Psalms with seven of his own and published an incomplete Psalter in 1556. This Psalter, later completed and often varied, in 1564 became the basis for the Scottish Psalter which was used in the kirks for eighty years.

When the Marian exiles returned to England they brought both tunes and the custom of singing. Strype records that in 1559 at St. Paul's Cross and elsewhere people began to sing "after Geneve fassyon."

The Old Version, as the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter came to be called, went through at least three hundred fifty-five editions between 1549 and 1700 and through a hundred forty-six more before 1868 to gain the distinction of being the third most frequently printed book in the English language, the first two being the 1611 prose Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

In 1696 Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady collaborated to produce a Psalter which became known as the New

Version; it was the first successor to the Old Version which gave the latter serious competition. The New Version sets the extreme limit of this study both because it was the only Psalter to gain the popularity of the Old Version and because, not long after its appearance, Englishmen began singing the hymns of Watts and Wesley and metrical paraphrases of the Bible as a popular type of writing largely died out.

In the century and a half between the Old Version and the New Version, more than a hundred men wrote metrical paraphrases of one or more Psalms and more than eighty wrote them of other parts of the Bible. This study includes more of the metrical Psalmists than any previous work, although most of them have been known through such studies as John Holland: *The Psalmists of Great Britain;* Henry A. Glass: *The Story of the Psalters;* John Julian: *Dictionary of Hymnology;* and Philipp von Rohr-Sauer: *English Metrical Psalms from 1600 to 1660.*

The metrical paraphrases of other parts of the Bible have never been treated fully before. They are not great poetic flights. Few of them have been reprinted in the present century, and only one or two have been considered worthy of reprinting in collections of religious poetry or of outstanding verse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is not difficult to discover the reason for the lack of poetic merit in them. For the most part the poets limited themselves very strictly to the text of the prose Bible at hand, though it may be said for them that they usually selected pasasges of real poetic value; they neither embellished the text with flights of poetic imagination nor deleted the prosy explanations. The reason for this strictness lay, of course, in a profound conviction that the Bible was inspired of God and not to be tampered with. Fuller stated the case accurately when he said that the poets had "drunk more of Jordan than of Helicon."

Furthermore, most of these poems were composed to be

sung or to be memorized, and for that reason the paraphrasts further impeded their genius by limiting the rhythm to common, short, or long meter, for which the usual tunes were written. Richard Baxter even wrote paraphrases with words bracketed, such words to be used if the tune one desired to sing were for long meter and to be omitted if it were common.

Despite these limitations accepted by almost all the paraphrasts, a great many of the well-known poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tried their hands at the form. Because of this fact and because this verse was probably more familiar to Englishmen of the period than any other type, it deserves to be studied both for its own sake and for its contribution to our understanding of the taste of the period. Critical judgments should probably be made on the standards of popular rather than classical literature.

Among the men whose paraphrases are studied in this thesis are the following more or less well known in the literary field: Francis Bacon, Richard Baxter, Thomas Becon, Alexander Brome, Thomas Carew, Charles Cotton, Alexander Cowley, Richard Crashaw, John Denham, John Donne, Michael Drayton, Phineas Fletcher, George Gascoigne, Joseph Hall, George Herbert, Thomas Middleton, John Milton, Alexander Montgomerie, John Norris, John Oldham, Francis Quarles, George Sandys, Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke, Edmund Spenser, the Earl of Surrey, Josuah Sylvester, Nahum Tate, Jeremy Taylor, Henry Vaughan, George Wither, Henry Wotton, and Sir Thomas Wyatt.

But this fad was not limited to literary men. People of high place—Queen Elizabeth, King James I, Archbishop Matthew Parker—wrote metrical paraphrases of parts of the Bible. Sternhold himself was a Gentleman of the Privy Chamber; Christopher Tye, music master and organist to Edward VI, paraphrased part of the Acts of the Apostles in meter and set his work to music. Edward Alleyn, the

Shakespearian actor, probably wrote a metrical Psalm. William Byrd, the musician, and Thomas, Lord Fairfax, the famous parliamentary general, both set their hands to write in this form.

Then others of less note than these wrote metrical paraphrases. They were clergymen—Roman, Anglican, and Protestant nonconformist—, lawyers, musicians, teachers, printers, nobles, members of Parliament, and at least one translator, medical writer, soldier, dramatist, pamphleteer, traveller, evangelist, lexicographer and stenographer, hymn writer, authority on horse racing, and member of the Royal Society.

Outside of the Psalms the parts of the Bible which appeared most frequently in metrical form were the songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Barak, Hannah, Zacharias, Simeon, and Mary and the Song of Solomon. In whole or in part many other portions of Scripture were rendered in meter, including Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Judges, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Chronicles, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Daniel, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zachariah, Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, II Corinthians, Ephesians, II Thessalonians, I Timothy, Hebrews, I Peter, I John, II John, III John, Jude, Revelation. In addition several apocryphal books were included. Of course every book of the Bible was included in the condensed metrical paraphrases, of which there were several.

What inspired these men and women from almost all stations of society and from almost every occupation to write the Bible into metrical form? Probably some wrote because such writing was popular and might gain them reputation or patrons; others wrote to provide entertainment for their friends, and some probably felt inspired to write this type of verse as other men are inspired to write secular poetry. But the most important impetus was the fact that these

men believed that the Scriptures were divinely inspired. Many in the seventeenth century especially believed that no literature but that of the Bible was fit for Christian eyes to peruse. Certainly nothing but the Bible was fit for singing in the church service. Thus metrical versions were bound with the Book of Common Prayer and with the Bible for congregational use.

Many of the paraphrasts give introductory statements of the reasons for printing their work. Some, for example, give directions for singing their poems. Of these some state clearly that they are dissatisfied with the Old Version and suggest that their Psalms or other metrical paraphrases be substituted. Others offer their verses as substitutes for popular secular songs.

Other writers say that their verse is to entertain the devout and others that they are trying to attract readers to the Bible by putting it into poetry, a form more pleasant to read than prose.

Others wrote metrical paraphrases as short commentaries, indicating that the words of the paraphrase are more easily understood than those of the prose Bible. Another very frequent purpose in writing is to render the Biblical passages more easily remembered or, as Coles puts it, "portable in Hand and Heart." Abridgments like those of William Samuel, Henock Clapham, William Ainsworth, J. L., and Simon Wastell were written to be memorized by children. Samuel even gives a complicated mnemonic device, based on counting the joints of one's fingers, to assist in giving the chapter and book of a passages once the metrical version has been memorized.

Other paraphrasts say that they write to asist the reader in following the Biblical example and precept to write and sing poetry. The scholars knew that parts of the Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments were in poetic form, and the paraphrasts often cite this precedent for their

work. Such Bible verses as Colossians 3:16—"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"—were frequently quoted as a reason for the composition of metrical paraphrases.

Still other paraphrasts give a strictly evangelistic reason for their work: "to preache thy wurde thy felowes for to win," as Baldwin puts it. Others write to assist in devotional exercise in family or private worship or to deter the readers from sin.

As the seventeenth century nears its close, one can perceive a change in the metrical paraphrases. They are progressively less strictly paraphrastic and more nearly like modern hymns. Barton, Keach, Boyse, and others whom I have included frequently paraphrased non-consecutive scriptures. Others wrote hymns modelled on passages of the Bible, with the appropriate references printed in the margin. Other hymns were based on single verses, the references for which were placed as headnotes.

Thus gradually the pious seventeenth century idea that only the Bible was fit material for religious poetry and song gave way and the metrical paraphrases were replaced by the hymns of Watts and Wesley. It is of interest, however, that the mode of versifying the Bible in English has never died out entirely. New metrical paraphrases of the Psalms still appear almost every year, and metrical non-Psalms are not infrequent.

VITA

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